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Life below the poverty line: lessons from eating on \$2 a day

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Life below the poverty line: lessons from eating on \$2 a day

Abstract

Global poverty statistics are staggering - 1.2 billion people live in extreme poverty and about 870 million are undernourished - but even in an affluent country such as Australia, many people struggle to eat well. Earlier this month, over 10,000 Australians, including myself, took up a charity challenge to live on \$2 a day. The idea was to experience how impoverished people across the world live.

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Life below the poverty line: lessons from eating on \$2 a day

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Even in an affluent country such as Australia, many people struggle to eat well. Alex Proimos/Flickr, CC BY-NC

Global poverty statistics are staggering – 1.2 billion people live in extreme poverty and about 870 million are undernourished – but even in an affluent country such as Australia, many people struggle to eat well.

Earlier this month, over 10,000 Australians, including myself, took up a charity challenge to live on \$2 a day. The idea was to experience how impoverished people across the world live.

Not a balanced diet

This is what I learnt about the nutritional implications of an impoverished diet.

The most difficult aspect, by far, was the lack of variety and flavour. Breakfast every day was porridge oats, while lunch was either spaghetti with tinned tomato or rice with carrot, and dinner was a lentil or chick pea dish.

Whole food groups were missing.

My budget didn't allow for any fruit, for instance, nor oil or margarine. Indeed, the only dairy food I had was a precious full day's allowance spent on two litres of full-cream milk.

I could only purchase no-name brands, but took advantage of supermarket specials and scoured local fruit and vegetable markets for best prices.



What the author of this article lived on for a week. Author

Nutritionally, this was a low-fat diet (16% total energy) that was very high in carbohydrates (65%), and relatively low in protein (15%). At least it had plenty of fibre with 29 grams per day.

While almost in line with the National Health and Medical Research Council's Acceptable Macronutrient Distribution Range (AMDR) to prevent chronic disease, this is not an eating plan dietitians would recommend. And it's not in line with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Essentially, \$2 a day can buy a very basic vegetarian diet with little, if any, animal protein (meat, fish, dairy).

Dried beans and lentils are good options for cheap protein sources, and a few (non free-range) eggs may be affordable. Vegetable choices are limited to the cheaper ones such as potatoes, pumpkin, carrots, cabbage, onions and canned tomatoes.

Coffee and alcohol had no place in the budget. I had to omit all "extra" foods and found myself craving sugar by the end of the first day.

Eating on \$2 a day for five days: the shopping list			
Food	Brand	Price	Total
500g spaghetti	Guacci vermicelli No 17	99c	\$0.99
Long-grain rice (1 kg)	IGA Home Brand (Black & Gold)	\$1.50	500g = \$0.75
Porridge oats (750g)	IGA Home Brand (Black & Gold)	\$1.51	375g = \$0.76
Milk (full cream) (2L)		\$2.00	\$2.00
Sugar (2kg)	IGA Home Brand (Black & Gold)	\$1.79	150g = \$0.14
375g tin tomatoes	IGA Home Brand (Black & Gold)	59c each	\$0.59
Dried brown lentils (375g)	McKenzie	\$2.03 per bag	190g = \$1.02
Dried chick peas (375g)	McKenzie	\$1.80	190g = \$0.90
Stock cubes (veg) (12)	Oxo	\$2.16	3 cubes = \$0.54
Tea bags (100)	Lipton	\$2.99	5 bags = \$0.15
Garlic cloves (peeled)	Leisure Coast Fruit Market	\$7.99/kg	4 cloves = \$0.32
1 brown onion (190g)	Leisure Coast Fruit Market	1.29/kg	\$0.25
1 red chilli hot (45g)	Leisure Coast Fruit Market	\$9.99/kg	\$0.45
1 potato (washed) (185g)	Leisure Coast Fruit Market	\$3.99/kg	\$0.74
2 carrots (140g)	Leisure Coast Fruit Market	\$2.49/kg	\$0.35
Vegetables (sub total)			\$1.79
TOTAL			\$9.94

The author's budget for what she ate during a week while living on \$2 a day. The Author / The Conversation
Click to enlarge

It's clearly difficult to meet vitamin and mineral requirements on such a low budget. My calcium intake, for instance, was far below the recommended 1,000 milligrams a day at only 600 milligrams.

In our own backyard

Influences on dietary choices are extremely complex, but we know the cost of healthy foods is a key barrier to good nutrition in Australia. That barrier is bound to get considerably bigger if the proposal to expand the GST to fresh food is implemented.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) monitors quarterly changes in prices of consumer goods and services, including food, and provides a measure of inflation.

The affordability of food can be assessed using a specific selection of healthy items, known as a healthy food basket survey. Such surveys have been developed in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and the Northern Territory.

The NSW initiative, the Illawarra Healthy Food Basket biennial survey costs a basket of 57 foods designed to meet the weekly nutritional requirements of a family of five.

In 2011, it cost \$345 per week, a 71% increase from 2000. The 2011 figure represents 34% of average weekly earnings, or 36% of welfare payments.



The cost of healthy food is the greatest barrier of good nutrition in Australia. Alex Proimos/Flickr, CC BY-NC

Food prices are known to be even higher in remote and rural locations.

In Queensland, the cost of a healthy food basket rose by 43% between 2000 and 2006, compared with a rise in CPI for food of 32.5%.

Meeting their family's basic food needs costs residents in very remote areas an average of about 30% more each fortnight than people living in cities. In these areas, the cost of healthy foods has risen more than the cost of some less nutritious foods, making the latter relatively more affordable.

In Northern Territory communities, up to 37% of the family income is needed to purchase food in remote stores. One of the proposed "Close the Gap" equity targets is for 90% of Indigenous families to be able to access a healthy food basket for under 25% of their income by 2018. Progress towards this goal is slow.

While those of us who spent a week eating for \$2 a day may have felt we experienced extreme poverty, it was nowhere near the real thing. After all, our \$2 did not have to stretch to other living expenses, such as housing costs, transport or rent.